

1940-1

## Britain, Battle of

The Battle of Britain was the air war (1940-41) fought over Great Britain between the German Luftwaffe and the Royal Air Force during WORLD WAR II. Having decided (June 1940) to invade Britain, Adolf HITLER ordered a preliminary attack by the Luftwaffe to destroy the RAF and neutralize the Royal Navy. After a series of raids on British coastal defenses in July, the Luftwaffe's attack began in earnest on August 8. With a total force of 900 fighters (mostly MESSERSCHMITT BF-109s) and 1,300 bombers, the Germans mounted massive daily raids on southern England. Although the RAF had much smaller forces, about 650 HURRICANES and SPITFIRES, the newly developed RADAR enabled it to concentrate in vital areas for effective resistance.

On August 24 the Luftwaffe began attacks further inland, seeking to destroy the RAF bases and fighter production centers. By September 5 the RAF Fighter Command had lost 450 planes and was close to defeat. At that point, however, Hitler and Luftwaffe chief Herman GOERING changed their strategy. Infuriated by British bombing raids (August 24-29) on Berlin, they concentrated the German attacks on London. With its defense task simplified, the RAF inflicted heavy losses on the German bombing formations. Early in October the Luftwaffe switched entirely to night raids. By the end of that month Hitler had canceled his invasion plans.

German bombing attacks on British cities (the "Blitz") continued until May 1941, when most of the Luftwaffe planes were withdrawn to prepare for the German invasion of the USSR. The Battle of Britain, however, had been won by October 1940. Of the RAF fighter pilots, Winston CHURCHILL said: "Never, in the field of human conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few." In saving Britain from invasion, they had inflicted the first major defeat on Germany in the war.

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